

# Literacy, Sexuality, and the Value(s) of Queer Young Adult Literatures

*Banks draws on personal experience to show the importance of reading LGBT young adult literature empathetically and critically.*

I n my junior year of high school, I visited my brother to enjoy a bit of the “college life” my brother had talked about, spending a day in Henderson Library to get materials for my research paper. I spent about an hour on the paper, another two hours working up the courage to walk to the third floor and locate the HQ (Library of Congress: Family, Marriage, Women, and Sexuality) section, and my final two hours pouring over books with titles that fascinated and frightened me, like Dennis Altman’s *Homosexual: Oppression and Liberation*. The card catalog had told me this is where I’d find something about myself, in the shelves of books that I would never have found in the public library in little Louisville, Georgia. The books that rendered your life in print, that reflected your feelings and fears in nuanced and meaningful ways—those texts were found usually on class trips to big cities, and were as often left there because returning with them meant hiding them along with all those parts of yourself you already hid, knowing that family, friends, and community did not value them.

But the books you *did* find were rarely, if ever, truly meant for you, at least if you were an adolescent struggling with coming out and finding love. You might find a bit of yourself in Edmund White’s now-classic *A Boy’s Own Story* and its sequel *The Beautiful Room Is Empty*, but once you got past those two, you were more often faced with a host of books that weren’t about adolescence at all, but about coming out as adults, away from home and often in places where the protagonists could blend in or be invisible: think Andrew Halloran’s *Dancer from the Dance: A Novel*, Rita Mae Brown’s *Rubyfruit Jungle*, and John Rechy’s *City of Night*. In books about frustrated youths who had escaped their small towns for

glamorous but often equally tragic lives at colleges or in large cities such as New York or San Francisco or Washington DC, I found nothing about the successes of love for the young, only the opposite. What I learned to hope for was escape, a calculated move away from my family and community and, if possible, the good sense not to call home again. The characters that inhabited gay literature from the 1960s to the 1990s, even if at times positive and sympathetic, taught me to disconnect and move on.

Now, as an adult, I see a proliferation of LGBT texts ostensibly written for and marketed to young readers, particularly at a time when the Internet affords more options to young readers than I had in the HQ section of my brother’s college library. Why do we suddenly have so many stories available? And what uses do they have for adolescent readers and, perhaps, their teachers? The other essays in this important issue of *English Journal* highlight a number of novels, stories, poems, and nonfiction texts that teachers have found valuable in their teaching, and in doing so, they present powerful arguments for remembering the value of texts as spaces for student-readers to locate themselves, as spaces for these young people to see their lives reflected back to them, but also to see alternative possibilities for richer, happier, fuller lives.

## Beyond Inclusion

Merely having the texts available is not enough, particularly when we think about the stakes. Certainly, teachers have to worry not only about how choosing these texts will affect their students but also how these choices will be understood (and perhaps resisted) by administrators, parents, and others in their communities. These immediate rhetorical/pragmatic

concerns can often take precedence over the value and quality of the chosen texts. In fact, the question teachers usually bring to me when they want to include an LGBT text in their class is not “What’s the *best, most powerful* LGBT young adult novel you’ve read recently?” but “Is there a book you think I could *get away with* without ruffling too many feathers?” The desire to include LGBT characters is laudable, but there also needs to be something *there* in the books beyond just queer characters.

And what are the stakes that make “mere inclusion” not enough (Malinowitz 251)? For me, no less than rescuing students—queer and nonqueer alike—from the damaging (and sometimes deadly) effects of homophobia and intolerance. It takes

more than merely recognizing that LGBT people exist to prevent tragedies like the murder of 15-year-old Lawrence King by a classmate in February 2008 (Setoodeh), or the more recent attacks on queer teens in Kansas (“Teen Beating”), New York City (Michels), and Iowa (Towle).

Literacy teachers inhabit spaces to disrupt the thinking that leads to such heinous crimes.

One way to approach this work involves critical literacy, helping students recognize that the texts that surround us actively shape our lives. A critical literacy approach to LGBT literature might, for example, ask students to compare an experience of violence as represented in a novel to any of the above mentioned attacks on queer youth, and ask questions about how and why these events happen, as well as how these events are reported in the news. Of the four above, for example, only the Lawrence King murder made national/mainstream news.

A critical literacy approach requires that we address more than the violence. Learning to read is always about more than just “word calling”; it is about the ways that we learn the language for describing ourselves, for narrating ourselves into existence, for articulating our needs, values, and *value* in the spaces that we need to survive in. The texts we read make certain kinds of lives possible by presenting us with myths, values, and images that remind us of the options before us. As Jonathan Alexander argues, “If we are invested in working

with students to develop a critical understanding of their places—and their possibilities—in the world, then we must consider issues of sexuality as central to the development of contemporary literacy” (5).

Harriet Malinowitz has noted that “unlike [heterosexual] adolescence, which has received copious treatment in the humanities, social science, and natural science literatures, and unlike religious, educational, military, matrimonial, reproductive, and other celebrated commencements,” the lives and experiences of LGBT people, often demonstrated through the genre of the “coming out” narrative as a significant rite of passage, continue to be “unhonored, unblessed, and confusingly unstructured” (36). Malinowitz reminds us here of the value of narratives to help give our lives structure, to cast our experiences in language and to provide a context for our seemingly individual experiences. These structures render certain kinds of experiences possible; by viewing characters coming out to both resistant and accepting parents, friends, and teachers, young readers can see the possibilities available to them.

This is particularly true with a book such as Alex Sanchez’s recent *The God Box*, which shows two gay adolescents exploring how their differing interpretations of their Christian faith function in relation to their emerging sense of themselves as gay males. Much of that book offers young readers language and arguments to use when they find themselves attacked or criticized for their identities. In this way, the book helps young readers develop a critical literacy of self, one that underscores the social aspects that shape all our lives.

Current queer YA literature offers critical literacy moments beyond the context of “real life.” When I teach David Levithan’s debut novel *Boy Meets Boy*, students find it humorous and interesting (in that voyeuristic “that’s kinda weird” way); they love the narrative voice and its attitude and they find the incongruity of the drag-queen-star-quarterback both wonderfully exaggerated and oddly critical of the gendered world of football/team sports. Yet they are also quick to say, “But this book is too unrealistic! That would never happen!” In presenting a “modern fairytale,” Levithan disrupts mythical constructions that continue to pervade American culture, particularly myths about gender, sexuality, and religion, and creates a space in a critical pedagogy for reenvisioning the options before us.

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### From Sympathy to Empathy

The majority of LGBT young adult literature, however, still comes in the genre of “realistic fiction” and is primarily character-driven. From 1980 to 1995, most of the LGBT characters in YA fiction were secondary, often dead or killed off during the narrative, or run out of town and separated from community and/or family, as in Bette Greene’s *The Drowning of Stephan Jones*, Nancy Garden’s *Annie on My Mind*, Jacqueline Woodson’s *The House You Pass on the Way*, and Aidan Chambers’ *Dance on My Grave*. While these texts might teach *sympathy*, encouraging young readers to feel sorry for the dead, displaced, or disconnected characters, they do little to engage readers empathetically with characters who exist only as plot devices or subjects for still-living characters to talk about. The message is hard to miss: LGBT characters are most useful if they’re dead or gone. This is not the reality that students need.

More recently, LGBT characters get to live, and because these characters are often the protagonists of the stories, readers are challenged to understand them as fuller human beings with thoughts, desires, and interests that may mirror their own and that are not necessarily silenced by novel’s end. Even at the small-town Barnes and Noble where I live I can find a new canon of queer YA literature: Alex Sanchez’s Rainbow Boys series as well as his middle school novel *So Hard to Say*; Brent Hartinger’s *Geography Club* and *The Order of the Poison Oak*; Julie Ann Peters’ *Keeping You a Secret*, *Far from Xanadu*, and *Luna*; P. E. Ryan’s *Saints of Augustine*; Sara Ryan’s *Empress of the World*; Tea Benduhn’s *Gravel Queen*;

Lauren Myracle’s *Kissing Kate*; and pioneering short-story collections such as the recently revised and updated *Not the Only One: Lesbian and Gay Fiction for Teens*, edited by Jane Summer. These books present adolescent characters, mostly gay and lesbian (bi/trans characters remain hard to find, *Luna* being a welcomed exception), as smart, interesting, and often complex individuals in search of themselves and a place in the world that will let them develop as full human beings. These are

not books in which the queer characters die or contract a horrible disease, at least not merely *because* of their sexuality. These are characters that young readers can relate to, whose struggles to find love and connection resonate beyond the sexuality of the protagonists. Our bookshelves are richer for their existence.

But these are also texts primarily about characters whose existence is a struggle; the plots are mostly about individuals trying to “deal with” their sexualities, conflicts with others because of their sexualities, fears of parental reactions, etc. While these conflicts may be “realistic,” they are also reductive when rendered as a canon of available literature, suggesting that the experiences of being queer are only about these personal conflicts, not about larger issues or more complex experiences with the world. And more significantly, these books, taken as a whole, continue to reinforce the notion that one’s sexuality is inherently controversial and conflicted, and I’m not sure that is true for all LGBT adolescents today (see Ritch C. Savin-Williams’s *The New Gay Teenager*), though news reports such as those mentioned above remind us that we still live at a time when one’s sexuality can have dire social and personal ramifications.

I would like to report that we have an abundance of quality LGBT literature for young adults, filled with characters complexly rendered and experiences that mirror the often difficult and often exciting lives that young LGBT people live today, but I don’t think we do. Recently, while chatting with a lesbian author and friend about her forthcoming


second novel, I asked how revisions from her editor were going. Her frustration was palpable: Her editors are older, grew up in a time when LGBT people left home and sought refuge elsewhere, when our lives were, it seemed, utterly rooted in conflicts with ourselves, our families, and our communities. They do not understand how her protagonists could not have these conflicts. My friend tried to explain

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to her editors that as a young person herself, who went through adolescence in the last decade, she didn't necessarily have these now "mythic" experiences that seemed to govern the lives of the lesbians who lived through the last half of the 20th century. My friend wants to write novels that speak to a different experience, or that might suggest a better or wider range of human experiences, but the publishing industry she works in has its

own assumptions about queerness and queer experience, particularly where youth and coming out are concerned. Those assumptions are rooted in a past that, in many ways, may no longer resonate with young readers, or which may reinforce some of the conditions we'd like to disrupt.

On the whole, however, English language arts teachers work in a genuinely new and exciting space, where texts of various kinds are available to render queer and youth experiences in ways that support

and nurture readers. My concern for the limits of currently available queer YA literature are not meant to encourage teachers to wait for "better" books or to avoid completely the enterprise of bringing these texts into their classrooms, using the lens of critical literacy. While "coming out" comprises the bulk of LGBT books for young readers, these new texts contain other issues as well; part of our work can be to encourage students to read the available texts both *empathetically* and *critically*, aware of the contexts that bring these books into existence and how changes in our culture could provide more positive, complex experiences for us all. 

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### READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

Traci Gardner, RWT

Encourage teen readers to explore the role empathy plays in their reading with "Assessing Cultural Relevance: Exploring Personal Connections to a Text." In this lesson, students evaluate a text for its relevance to themselves individually and to the class as a whole. Students then search for additional, relevant texts and write reviews of the texts that they choose. [http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson\\_view.asp?id=1003](http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=1003)